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Romuald I. Lakowski
MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada

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Abstract

An exploration of Tolkien's depictions of dragons in his stories for children, Roverandom and Farmer Giles of Ham. Draws on "On Fairy-stories," the Beowulf lecture, the Father Christmas letters, and a little-known "Lecture on Dragons" Tolkien gave to an audience of children at the University Museum in Oxford, as well as source Tolkien would have known: Nennius, The Fairy Queene, and so on.

Additional Keywords

J.R.R Tolkien; Naming; War

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"A Wilderness of Dragons": Tolkien's Treatment of Dragons in *Roverandom* and *Farmer Giles of Ham*

Romuald I. Lakowski

In this paper I will examine Tolkien's treatment of dragons in his writings for children (excluding the *Hobbit*), starting briefly with his "Lecture on Dragons" (which will be contrasted with Tolkien's *Beowulf* essay) and then going on to discuss the treatment of the Sea Serpent and the White Dragon in *Roverandom*, and of Chrysophylax in *Farmer Giles of Ham*. I will also be looking at medieval and renaissance parallels in *Beowulf* and the *Völsunga Saga* and Book I of Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, as possible sources for the largely comic treatment of dragons in the works I am considering.

As is well known, Tolkien's interest in dragons began as a child when he first read the story of Sigurd and the Völsungs in Andrew Lang's *The Red Fairy Book*. He was even inspired to write a story in verse about "a green great dragon" when he was about six or seven: "I remember nothing about it except a philological fact. My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one [...] had to say 'a great green dragon'" (*Letters* 214, 221).[1] In his 1936 Andrew Lang Lecture "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien tells us about the impact of his own childhood reading:

> But the land of Merlin and Arthur was better than these, and best of all the nameless North of Sigurd of the Völsungs, and the prince of all dragons. Such lands were pre-eminently desirable. I never imagined that the dragon was of the same order as the horse. And that was not solely because I saw horses daily, but never even the footprint of a worm. The dragon had the trade-mark *Of Faërie* written plain upon him. In whatever world he had his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the

[1] As an aside, I will note that although his most famous dragons are bronze or golden-red, Tolkien continued to be fascinated by green dragons as an adult. The dragon in Tolkien's poem "The Dragon's Visit" is most definitely green, and there is a *Green Dragon Inn* in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, there are several real Green Dragon Inns in England and it is possible that Tolkien may even have visited one: there is a Green Dragon Inn in Sambourne in Tolkien's native Warwickshire and also one in Cambridge.

> making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood, intruding into my relatively safe world, in which it was, for instance, possible to read stories in peace of mind, free from fear. But the world that contained even the imagination of Fáfnir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril. ("On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 134–35)[2]

Later on, while attending King Edward's School in Birmingham, he pursued his philological interests, studying Old English, Old Norse and Gothic on his own. He would also delight his high school friends by reciting from *Beowulf*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and recounting "horrific episodes from the Norse *Völsungasaga*, with a passing gibe at Wagner whose interpretation of the myths he held in contempt" (Carpenter 46).[3]

While attending Oxford as an undergraduate, Tolkien continued to be interested in dragons. In a letter written in 1964, Tolkien explained that he was primarily a scientific philologist and that he "began the construction of languages in early boyhood […]. But I was also interested in traditional tales (especially those concerning dragons); and writing (not reading) verse and metrical devices. These things began to flow together when I was an undergraduate to the despair of my tutors and near-wrecking of my career" (*Letters* 345). It was at this time, while he was composing the *Book of Lost Tales*, starting in about 1915–16, that Tolkien wrote his earliest stories involving dragons: "The Fall of Gondolin" and "The Tale of Turambar and the Foalókë" (*History of Middle-earth* II: 69–220).

The Lecture on Dragons and the "Beowulf" Essay

There are two Tolkien texts that are especially important for understanding his knowledge of medieval dragon-lore: the first is the famous

[2] Tolkien adds two interesting notes to this passage. In a long endnote (Note D) to "footprint of a Worm," he writes: "I was introduced to zoology and palaeontology ('for children') quite as early as to Faërie. […] I liked the 'prehistoric' animals best […]. But I did not like being told that these creatures were 'dragons'" (158–59). After "free from fear," he adds in a footnote: "This is, naturally, often enough what children mean when they ask: 'Is it true?' They mean: 'I like this, but is it contemporary? Am I safe in my bed?' The answer: 'There is certainly no dragon in England today', is all that they want to hear" (135n2). Tolkien also discussed the relationship between dinosaurs and dragons in his 1938 "Lecture on Dragons"—see Hammond and Scull, *Companion and Guide*, II:219.

[3] See also the report by Mr. Reynolds, one of Tolkien's teachers, on the paper on Norse Sagas given by Tolkien to the school's Literary Society reproduced in *The Annotated Hobbit* (3).

essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," first published in 1936; the other is the unpublished "Lecture on Dragons," delivered in 1938 and discussed by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond in their *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* [C&G] (II:219–221).[4] I will begin with the second text because of its more general import. In his "Lecture on Dragons," presented to an audience of children at the University Museum in Oxford, on 1 January 1938, (shortly after the publication of *The Hobbit*) besides discussing the dragon fight in *Beowulf* and the fight between Sigurd and Fáfnir in the *Völsunga Saga*, Tolkien also related the legend of Thor and the Midgard Serpent, and briefly referred "to Chinese dragons, to Merlin and the red and white dragons in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and to St. George" (C&G II:221). Unfortunately, this lecture, which Hammond and Scull consider as providing a "yardstick for the consideration of dragons" in Tolkien's writings, remains unpublished except for a page that they quote in their *Reader's Guide*, together with a brief summary of the rest.

In the passage that Hammond and Scull quote, Tolkien defines a dragon as "a serpent creature but with four legs and claws; his neck varied in length but had a hideous head with long jaws and teeth or snake-tongue" (219). It also had a long powerful tail whose swish was dangerous. Some had wings—"the legendary kind of wings that go together with front legs." Many were *fire-drakes*, flaming dragons, "whose breath was flame and venom, and withered what it touched" (220). A respectable dragon has to be twenty feet or more. Tolkien goes on to describe the malice of dragons in a passage that clearly owes much to the account of Sigurd's fight with Fáfnir:

> The dragon may have been 'founded on worm' but he was more terrible than any *dinosaur*. Because he was filled with a horrible spirit. […] He was filled with malice. Not only […] mere animal fierceness […], but with hatred of other living things as such. […] He rejoiced in destruction, and his wicked heart was fired by a smouldering and envious guess at the [worth] of the things destroyed. Legend had filled him with evil, and he grew strong on that terrible gift: he was cunning, deadly, bitter and piercingly keen . . . . His glance has a terrible effect if it holds yours. He may seek to bind your will. At least that was the way of old dragons who had lived long in wickedness. Also he will probably try to find out your name. For dragons also deal in evil magic, and even when defeated may (if they have your name) curse you as they die. (220)

[4] Hammond and Scull also discuss the "Lecture on Dragons" in *Artist and Illustrator* 53, 81, 136, 153; and Scull in "Dragons from Andrew Lang's Retelling of Sigurd to Tolkien's Chrysophylax," 59.

Dragons are inspired not only by hatred but also by greed. In a passage clearly inspired by *Beowulf*, Tolkien tells his audience of children that dragons "loved to possess beautiful things—though they could not use or enjoy them. They hoarded them. But they were terribly keen-scented after thieves. The hottest thief-haters and the cruellest thief-pursuers are usually those who possess large wealth which they cannot enjoy, but only lose." Tolkien also told his child audience that the function of dragons was to test the skill of heroes and other things, especially courage. Courage is what is needed first of all to pierce a dragon's armor: "the most remarkable thing about the great dragons of legend is that their legends mostly tell of their overthrow . . . . Dragons can only be defeated by brave men—usually *alone*. Sometimes a faithful friend may help, but it is rare; friends have a way of deserting you when a dragon comes. Dragons are the final test of heroes" (220). After this Tolkien went on discuss "the greatest of all the old northern dragon stories," the account of the killing of the dragon Fáfnir by the Völsung Sigurd. In a deleted passage Tolkien also explains the nature of dragon's fire: "The real dragon's fire may seem fiery enough and set real things in flame; but it is not a cooking fire. It comes from the heat of the dragon's spirit" (Scull 59).

Unfortunately, until an edition of the "Lecture on Dragons" is published, we only have the excerpts quoted by Scull and Hammond available to us. Although Tolkien's essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" was addressed to a very different audience, it can help to give us important background on Tolkien's views of dragons to flesh out and supplement the comments made in the "Lecture on Dragons."

"*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" [BMC] was first given as the Sir Isaac Gollanz Memorial Lecture to the British Academy on 25 November 1936 and published in the *Proceedings of The British Academy* in the same year. The final essay is a condensed version of two much longer drafts edited by Michael Drout in *Beowulf and the Critics* (2002). Much has been written about this seminal essay and its impact on *Beowulf* studies. In view of the central importance that Tolkien gives to the "monsters" in this essay, it is surprising to find that Tolkien had relatively little to say about the dragon-slaying episode in *Beowulf*. His real focus, as Drout's edition of *Beowulf and the Critics* makes abundantly clear, is to provide a critique of the antiquarian interests of earlier *Beowulf* scholars and a defense of the literary value of the poem.

Early on in the essay Tolkien respectfully criticizes the views of his "old and kindhearted friend," R.W. Chambers, one of the great 20th-Century *Beowulf* scholars,[5] who lamented that the *Beowulf* poet only alluded in passing

[5] *Letters* 20; for Tolkien's relations with R.W. Chambers, see Hammond and Scull *Companion and Guide* II:152.

to the story of a famous feud: "For in this conflict […] we have a situation which the old heroic poets loved, and would not have sold for a wilderness of dragons" (qtd. in Tolkien, BMC 11). Despite Tolkien's brilliant rejoinder, there was some justification for Chamber's view. As Jonathan Evans (1985) and Kathryn Hume (1980) make clear, there were "enough dragons extant in Old English and Old Norse to qualify as the 'wilderness' of dragons Tolkien tried to wave away. Not all are very significant within the structures of the narratives they inhabit" (Evans 86). Tolkien, in reply to Chambers, makes a virtue out of the very scarcity of good dragon stories:

> As for the poem […] a man may well exchange for one good dragon what he would not sell for a wilderness. And dragons, real dragons […] are actually rare. In northern literature there are only *two* that are significant. If we omit from consideration the vast and vague Encircler of the World, Miðgarðsormr, the doom of the great gods and no matter for heroes, we have but the dragon of the Völsungs, Fáfnir, and Beowulf's bane. It is true that both of these are in *Beowulf*, one in the main story, and the other spoken by a minstrel praising Beowulf himself.[6] But this is not a wilderness of dragons […]. [The *Beowulf* poet] esteemed dragons, as rare as they are dire, as some do still. (BMC 12)

He goes on to comment: "As for the dragon […] we know this: the prince of the heroes of the North […] was a dragon-slayer. And his most renowned deed, from which in Norse he derived his title Fáfnisbani, was the slaying of the prince of legendary worms" (16). Nonetheless, Tolkien is uncomfortable with certain aspects of the Dragon-Slaying Episode in *Beowulf* and tries to anticipate some of the objections of his critics: "Beowulf's dragon […] is not to be blamed for being a dragon, but rather not being dragon enough, plain pure fairy-tale dragon." Despite certain vivid touches that portray the dragon as a "real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own […] the conception, none the less, approaches *draconitas* rather than *draco*: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life)" (17). Tolkien, nonetheless, argues that the balance of the poem is preserved and that the symbolism, though near the surface, never breaks through and becomes allegory: "Something more significant than a standard hero, a man faced with a foe more evil than any human enemy of house or realm, is before us, and yet incarnate in time, walking in heroic history" (17). Accepting the importance of the dragon in no way diminishes

[6] The "Sigemund Episode," *Beowulf* (ll. 874–902). In all other versions of the story the dragon-slaying Waelsung [Volsung] is Sigemund's son Sigurd/Siegfried.

the worth of the hero. Despite recognizing the archetypal significance of the dragon-fight, Tolkien insists the dragon has a real physical presence: "The dragon wields a physical fire, and covets gold not souls; he is slain with iron in his belly. Beowulf's *byrne* [corslet] was made by Weland, and the iron shield he bore against the serpent by his own smiths: it is not yet the breastplate of righteousness, nor the shield of faith for the quenching of all the fiery darts of the wicked" (23). Tolkien also insists in a footnote that, although it is true for man as a maker of myths that the monsters Grendel and the Dragon "in their lust, greed and malice have a part in him," he does not recognize any bond with them (46n23).

Tolkien insists on the fittingness of the dragon as a worthy opponent for Beowulf: "But for the universal significance which is given to the fortunes of his hero it is an enhancement and not a distraction […] that his final foe should be […] a dragon: a thing made by imagination for just such a purpose. […] [T]he dragon is the right end for Beowulf […]. The placing of the dragon is inevitable: a man can but die on his death-day" (31-32). On the other hand, Tolkien argues equally that the slaying of the dragon was not the ultimate dragon fight to end all dragon-fights:

> That the particular bearer of enmity, the Dragon, also dies is important chiefly to Beowulf himself. He was a great man. Not many even in dying can achieve the death of a single worm, or the temporary salvation of their kindred. Within the limits of human life Beowulf neither lived nor died in vain—brave men might say. But there is no hint, indeed there are many to the contrary, that it was a war to end war, or a dragon-fight to end dragons. It is the end of Beowulf, and of the hope of his people. (47n31)

Tolkien takes a much more pessimistic view of the dragon fight in *Beowulf* in his essay on "*Ofermod*" appended to his alliterative verse radio play *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (1953). There he accuses Beowulf, like the historic Beorhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon*, of being guilty of *ofermod* [excess]:

> [T]he excess persists, even when [Beowulf] is an old king upon whom the hopes of a people rest. He will not deign to lead a force against the dragon […]. He will only use a sword on this occasion, since wrestling singlehanded with a dragon is too hopeless even for the chivalric spirit. But he dismisses his twelve companions. He is saved from defeat, and the essential object, destruction of the dragon, only achieved by the loyalty of a subordinate. Beowulf's chivalry would otherwise have ended in his own useless death, with the dragon still at large. ("Homecoming" 144)

There some very important and very interesting differences between the "Lecture on Dragons" and the *Beowulf* essay that reflect a two-fold attitude towards medieval dragon-lore. In the *Beowulf* essay Tolkien is addressing a specialist audience of medieval scholars and trying to defend the significance and importance of the monsters (including the dragon) for understanding the development of the hero. Here Tolkien seems to see the actions of the dragon-slaying hero in almost wholly positive terms, though his comments on *Beowulf* in *Ofermod* suggest that he later adopted a more pessimistic one. On the other hand in the "Lecture on Dragons," Tolkien is explaining the medieval heroic code to a sympathetic and appreciative audience of nonspecialists, namely children. There is nothing patronizing about Tolkien's attitude to this audience; indeed, he puts into practice what he preaches in "On Fairy-stories" about taking children seriously as readers. However, it is inevitable that in the "Lecture" Tolkien should emphasize the universal and archetypal significance of dragons. He recognizes even in telling them how to be a dragon-slaying hero that his audience of children are very much aware that they are not "heroes," or at least not yet.

Among Tolkien's own dragon stories only the narrators of the various versions of the "Túrin Saga" (and to a lesser extent of "The Fall of Gondolin") in the *Book of Lost Tales* portray the dragon fight in heroic terms. In Tolkien's children's stories, on the other hand, the dragon fight is portrayed in mainly non-heroic if not anti-heroic terms. Bilbo is a burglar and a not a warrior. It is Bard the Bowman who actually shoots the dragon, while Bilbo only steals a cup—it is the story of *Beowulf* told from the perspective of the thief rather than the hero. Giles is a farmer and not a knight. He is not interested in killing Chrysophylax but instead is content to come to an agreement with him. Roverandom is a puppy, not a warrior like the mer-dog's master fighting to the death on the dragon ship the Red Worm, though like the moon-dog he does enjoy a bit of dragon baiting (*Roverandom* [*Rov.*] 49).

Roverandom

Although not published until 1998, Tolkien's children's story *Roverandom,* about a real dog who is transformed into a toy, was first composed in the 1920's. Roverandom has various adventures, including a visit to the Man in the Moon and a trip to the bottom of the sea. When Roverandom visits the Moon he meets the Moon Dog who has wings and can fly. Roverandom is also given a pair of wings by the Man in the Moon. Together the two dogs fly off and have various adventures. In one adventure the two dogs fly to the edge of the white side of the Moon and take refuge in a cave during a snow storm only to discover that it is the lair of the Great White Dragon, who comes straight out of Geoffrey of Monmouth:

> All the white dragons originally come from the moon, as you probably know; but this one had been to the world and back, so he had learned a thing or two. He fought the Red dragon in Caerdragon in Merlin's time, as you will find out in all the more up-to-date history books; after which the other dragon was Very Red. Later he did lots more damage in the Three Islands [*England, Scotland, and Wales*] and went to live on the top of [*Mount*] Snowdon for a time. (*Rov.* 33 and notes on p.97)

In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Merlin tells King Vortigern at Kaermerdin near Mount Snowdon that there are two dragons sleeping in a pool of water (vi.19, 168). When Vortigern has the pool drained, "there emerged two Dragons, one white, one red. As soon as they were near enough to each other, they fought bitterly, breathing out fire as they panted" (vii.3, 171). The White Dragon initially has the advantage and drives the Red Dragon to the edge of the pool. The Red Dragon "then turned upon the White One and forced it backwards in its turn" (ibid.). Merlin goes on to explain that the White Dragon stands for the Saxon Invaders, while the Red Dragon "represents the people of Britain, who will be overcome by the White One."

In *Roverandom* Tolkien explains that after the fight the White Dragon "had flown off to Gwynfa, some time after King Arthur's disappearance, at a time when dragons' tails were esteemed a great delicacy by the Saxon Kings. Gwynfa is not so far from the world's edge, and it is an easy flight from there to the moon for a dragon so titanic and so enormously bad as this one had become" (*Rov.* 33 and note on 97–98). The idea of dragon's tail as a delicacy, which seems to be original to Tolkien, is also found in *Farmer Giles of Ham* (22–23). Tolkien refers to the Great White Dragon in his "Lecture on Dragons," where he explains that the moon is "a refuge of dragons" and that his own dragon was "a Saxon White Dragon that [had] escaped from the Welsh border a long while ago" (*Artist and Illustrator* 81). Scull and Hammond are unable to find a satisfactory explanation for the reference to Gwynfa or "Paradise" (*Rov.* 98). It is possible that it the represents a playful reference to Mount Snowdon, even though it is supposed to be elsewhere. In the Welsh, the peak of Mountain Snowdon is "Yr Wyddfa" and the Snowdonian National Park is set in the Welsh County of Gwynedd, which taken together contain the two elements "Gwyn" and "fa" in "gwynfa." It may also be relevant that in 1924 just before Tolkien started writing *Roverandom*, Elsie Jeanette Oxenham, a once

well-known children's writer, wrote a book called *The Girls of Gwynfa*, about a girl's school which is set in that part of Wales.[7]

The White Dragon is also clearly associated with the phenomena of lunar eclipses: "Sometimes he let real red and green flames out of his cave when he was having a dragon-feast or was in a tantrum […]. Once or twice he had been known to turn the whole moon red, or put it out altogether" (*Rov.* 33–34). When Roverandom and the moondog take refuge in the Great White Dragon's cave by mistake he furiously chases after them: "That dragon had wings, like the sails that ships had when they still were ships and not steam-engines; and he did not disdain to kill anything from a mouse to an emperor's daughter. He meant to kill those two dogs" (34). Scull and Hammond point out a parallel with Spenser's description of the Dragon in *The Fairie Queene* (98). The Dragon's

> His flaggy wings when forth he did display,
> Were like two sayles, in which the hollow wynd
> Is gathered full, and worketh speedy way:
> And eke the pennes [feathers], that did his pineons bynd,
> Were like mayne-yards, with flying canvas lynd. (I.xi.10.1–5)

We are then told that "The dragon came after them, flapping like a flapdragon and snapping like a snapdragon, knocking the tops of mountains off" (34). Here, as Scull and Hammond explain "both *flapdragon* and *snapdragon* refer to a representation of a dragon or dragon's head constructed to open and shut its mouth, and carried by mummers at Christmas or in mayoral or civic shows and processions" (98–99). There is a very interesting discussion of snapdragons, hobby horses and mumming plays in Ralph Whitlock's *Here Be Dragons* (23–31), including a reproduction of the Padstow Oss [Horse], which is still used in Mayday processions and which Whitlock claims is really a snapdragon (26).

Tolkien represents this scene in the famous drawing "The White Dragon pursues Roverandom and the Moondog" (*Rov.* between 26-27), which is also included in *Artist and Illustrator* (#75, 81), and which he showed as a slide during his "Lecture on Dragons" in 1938. The *Roverandom* Dragon in turn also provided the inspiration for some of the drawings Tolkien did for *The Hobbit* (*Artist and Illustrator* #75, #134–136, 81, 142–143; *The Art of the Hobbit* #72–77, 106–111).

[7] For Yr Wyddfa and County Gwynedd, see www.yrwyddfa.com and www.gwynedd.com. For the Welsh settings of Oxenham's stories, see http://home.pacific.net.au/~bcooper/oxwales.htm.

When the Man-in-the-Moon sees the white dragon chasing the puppies, he utters a curse—"Drat that creature! […] drat those puppies! They will bring on an eclipse before it is due!" (*Rov.* 35)—he shoots out a spell and "hit the dragon splosh on the stomach (where all dragons are peculiarly tender." When the next eclipse came round, it "was a failure, because the dragon was too busy licking his tummy to attend to it" (36). Hammond and Scull in their introduction (xii–xiii) see this as a reference to the lunar eclipse of 8 November 1927, which was obscured by clouds in England. In the 1927 "Father Christmas" Letter, the Man-in-the-Moon comes down to earth to visit Father Christmas and "the North Polar Bear made him play 'snapdragons'" (*Father Christmas* 33). According to the *OED*, "In this sense 'a game or amusement (usually held at Christmas) consisting of snatching raisins out of a bowl or dish of burning brandy or other spirit and eating them whilst alight" (*Rov.* 91). The result was that the Man in the Moon burnt his fingers and "then he licked them, and then he liked the brandy and then the Bear gave him lots more, and he went to sleep on the sofa" (*Father Christmas* 33).[8] Only to wake up to be told the next day that "the moon was going out! The dragons had come out and were making an awful smoke and smother"; he "whizzed back" and "had to let loose one of his simply terrificalest freezing magics before he could drive the dragons back into their holes" (*Father Christmas* 34).

There are two other references to dragons in *Roverandom*. When Roverandom goes to visit Artaxerxes at the bottom of the sea, he meets the mer-dog, who tells him about his master:

> My first master was a Rover, a real one, a sea-rover who sailed his ship in the northern waters; it was a long ship with red sails, and he called it the Red Worm and loved it. […] One day I went sailing without being asked. He was saying farewell to his wife; the wind was blowing, and the men were thrusting the Red Worm out over the rollers into the sea. The foam was white about the dragon's neck; and I suddenly felt that I should not see him again after that day, if I didn't go too. […]
>
> There was a sea-fight on that voyage, and I ran up on the fore-deck while the arrows fell and sword clashed upon shield. But the men of the Black Swan boarded us, and drove my master's men all over the side. He was the last to go. He stood beside the dragon's head, and then he dived into the seas in all his mail; and I dived after him. (*Rov.* 65–66)

[8] In view of the various allusions to Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking Glass* cited by Hammond and Scull (*Rov.* 96), there is probably also an allusion to Carroll's *snap-dragon-fly* here as well.

As Scull and Hammond explain in their commentary (*ibid.* 102–103), the mer-dog's story is based on the "Saga of King Olaf Trygvesson" in Snorri Sturlason's *Heimskringla*. As recounted in Chapters 111 to 123 (in the Everyman edition [there is some discrepancy in chapter numbers here]) of the "Saga," Olaf, the first Christian king of Norway, fought a fierce sea battle with the Kings of Denmark and Sweden, which ended in defeat. When his ship the "Long Worm" or "Long Serpent" was surrounded, he committed suicide by jumping overboard. According to Scull and Hammond, "In the manuscript of *Roverandom* the ship is in fact called 'Long Worm', and Tolkien mentioned King Olaf's ship by this name in the lecture on dragons he gave in January 1938 at the University Museum, Oxford.—King Olaf had a famous dog, Vige, who died of grief when his master disappeared" (*Rov.* 102).[9] The change of name to the "Red Worm" in the final text may partly involve a reference to the British "Red Dragon." In Nennius' *British History*, which Tolkien also cites in *Finn and Hengest* (46) and several times in the commentary to his and E.V. Gordon's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,[10] a certain Ambrosius or Emrys shows King Vortigern a cloth. There were "two worms […] in it, one white the other red" (Nennius §42: 31). The white worm proceeds to push the red worm off the cloth. Ambrosius then explains: "The cloth represents your kingdom, and the two worms are two dragons. The red worm is your dragon [*vermis rufus draco tuus est* p.71] […] But the white one is the dragon of the people who have seized many peoples and countries in Britain" (§42: 31, 71). Whereas in Anglo-Saxon *wyrm* often meant "serpent" or "dragon," here the Latin *vermis*, though cognate with *wyrm*, means a literal "worm," although Ambrosius goes on to explain that it symbolically represents the Red Dragon of Britain.

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[9] Tolkien also quotes from Snorri's description of Olaf Tryggvason's last fight in Old Norse from Chapter 109 (119 in Everyman) of the "Saga" in his commentary on *Finn and Hengist: The Fragment and The Episode*, edited by Alan Bliss (90–91). The Everyman edition of the *Heimskringla* translates the passage quoted by Tolkien as follows:

> The king stood on the gangways of the Long Serpent, and shot the greater part of the day; sometimes with the bow, sometimes with the spear, and always throwing two spears at once. He looked down over the ship's side, and saw that his men struck briskly with their swords, and yet wounded but seldom. Then he called aloud, "Why do you strike so gently that ye seldom cut?" One among the people answered, "The swords are blunt and full of notches." (95)

Tolkien also refers to Olaf Tryggvason in the introduction to *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son* (121).

[10] For references to Nennius, see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, notes to lines 12, 13, 26, 113, 649, 2448, 2464 on pp.79–80, 85, 92, 115–116.

The red dragon is still today the Welsh national symbol. In Arthurian tradition, not only is Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon ("Dragon Head") associated with the Welsh dragon (Roger of Wendover, A.D. 498, p.28), but also Arthur himself. In Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthur has a dream before his battle with the Emperor of the Romans which is portrayed as a fight between a dragon and a bear:

> [Arthur] saw a bear flying through the air. At the growling of the bear every shore quaked. Arthur also saw a terrifying dragon flying in from the west and lighting up the countryside with the glare of its eyes. When these two met, they began a remarkable fight. The dragon […] attacked the bear time and again, burning it with its fiery breath and finally hurling its scorched body down to the ground. (x.3, 237)

Just as Arthur himself was often described as "Emperor of the Britons," Tolkien humorously refers to the "imperial" lineage of Chrysophylax (*Giles* 25, 43, 48, 58, 67).

The third incident occurs while Roverandom is visiting the wizard Artaxerxes at the bottom of the sea: the ancient Sea-serpent starts waking up and causes an unusual whirlpool (75). The Sea-serpent is huge: "When he was uncoiled he would certainly have reached a hundred miles (some people would say he could reach from Edge to Edge [of the World], but that is an exaggeration)" […]. When he undid a curl or two in his sleep, the waters heaved and shook […] for miles and miles around (75–76). "The Sea-Serpent gave a new and very unexpected turn!" and then "terrible tides [were] caused by the Sea-Serpent's stirrings" (77). The Sea-Serpent is a tail-biter or *ouroboros*: "all the while the Sea-serpent kept on turning, trying absentmindedly to get the tip of his tail in his mouth. But thank heavens! he was not properly and fully awake, or he might have come out and shaken his tail in anger, and then another continent would have been drowned" (78). Artaxerxes is only partially successful in casting a spell on the Sea-Serpent: "Probably Artaxerxes' magic was better than was supposed. At any rate, the Sea-serpent did not come out—luckily for this story. He put his mouth where his tail was, and yawned, opened his mouth as wide as the cave, and snorted" (79). The Sea-Serpent demands that Artaxerxes be banished and when the mer-people comply he goes back to sleep.

One obvious model for the Sea-serpent is the Jörmungand or Midgard Serpent, offspring of the Norse God Loki and the giantess Angrboða. In the *Prose Edda*, Snorri says that when the Midgard Serpent was brought before Odin: "he flung the serpent into the deep sea which surrounds the whole world, and it grew so large that it now lies in the middle of the ocean round the earth biting its own tail" (56, cf.78). At the Ragnarok, the Midgard serpent

will join with the wolf Fenrir, another of Loki's monstrous offspring in attacking the gods. The Midgard serpent will cause a great tidal wave: "The sea will lash against the land because the Miðgarð Serpent is writhing in giant fury trying to come ashore" (86–87). Snorri goes on to quote the words of the Seeress in the *Völuspá* (*Seeress's Prophecy*) in the *Poetic Edda*: "Jörmungand writhes / in giant rage; / the serpent churns up waves" (*Prose Edda* 89; cf. *Poetic Edda* 10 [*Vol.* st.50]). In the final battle, "The Miðgarð Serpent will blow so much poison that the whole sky and sea will be spattered by it" (87). In the end he is slain by Thorr who in turn "falls down dead, on account of the poison blown on him by the serpent" (88).

We know that Tolkien was certainly familiar with the Midgard Serpent not only from the reference in the "Lecture on Dragons" already mentioned above, but also from "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics." In the first draft edited by Michael Drout in *Beowulf and the Critics*, Tolkien actually wrote: "In all of Northern literature there but only three [*dragons*] that really count: the Encircler of the World of Men (Miðgarðsormr), the doom of the gods in what is left of Norse mythology; the dragon of the Vólsungs; and Beowulf's bane" (*Beowulf and the Critics* 88). This is somewhat qualified in the second draft (and in the published text): "In all northern literature there are only *two* that really count. If we omit from consideration the vast and vague figure of the Encircler of the World (Miðgarðsormr), the doom of the [great] Gods [and no matter for heroes], we have but the dragon of the Volsungs (Fáfnir), and Beowulf's bane" (*Beowulf and the Critics* 139 [BMC 12]).[11]

At first sight the spirit of the two encounters between Artaxerxes and the Sea-Serpent in *Roverandom* and between Thor and the Midgard Serpent seem totally different. However, Snorri also records a couple of earlier encounters between Thor and the Serpent in comic contexts. In the first, Thor visits the castle of the giant Utgard-Loki where he wrestles with a giant cat and only manages to lift one of its paws off the ground, only to be told mockingly afterwards by Utgard-Loki: "I thought it no less wonderful when you lifted up the cat and, to tell you the truth, everyone who saw it was terrified when you lifted one of its paws from the ground. That cat was not what it appeared to be; it was the Miðgarð Serpent that lies curled around the world and is scarcely long enough head to tail to encircle the earth" (Sturlason, *Prose Edda* 78). After this, Thor "resolved to see if he could contrive an encounter with the Miðgarð Serpent" (ibid.), which he after afterwards did making "as great a fool of the Miðgarð Serpent" (80) as Útgarð-Loki had made of him. When Thor went

[11] For the exact wording of the published text, see quotation in the "The Lecture on Dragons and the 'Beowulf' Essay" section.

fishing in disguise with the giant Hymir, he used the head of an ox as bait and threw it overboard:

> The Miðgarð Serpent snapped at the ox-head, but the hook stuck fast in the roof of its mouth and, when it realized that, it jerked away so hard that both Thór's fists knocked against the gunwale. Then Thór grew angry and, exerting [all] his divine strength, dug in his heels so hard that both legs went through the boat and he was digging his heels in the sea bottom. He drew the serpent up on board, […] Thór fixed the serpent with his eye and […] the serpent glared back, belching poison. (80)

Just at the point when Thor was ready to strike it with his hammer, the giant Hymir cut the line with his bait-knife and the serpent sank back into the sea. However different the details when compared with Tolkien's narrative, these two stories of Snorri Sturlason's show that the treatment of Midgard Serpent could be a matter for thorough-going comedy and even farce, in a way that generally resembles Tolkien's treatment of the encounter between Artaxerxes and the Sea-Serpent.

FARMER GILES OF HAM

Although not published until 1949, the earliest version of *Farmer Giles of Ham* was probably written in about 1927 (*Giles* iii). The story, which has a pseudo-medieval setting, is in many ways a delightful, and even in places brilliant, parody of the traditional dragon-slaying tale. While Chrysophylax is in many ways a traditional medieval dragon, he is also modelled on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century comic treatment of cowardly dragons found in such works of children's literature as Kenneth Grahame's *The Reluctant Dragon* and Edith Nesbit's *The Dragon Tamers*.[12] The hero is not a knight but a sturdy yeoman farmer. He has a magic sword that fights by itself. The cowardly dragon is not slain but ignominiously tamed and made to carry (most of) his treasure back to Ham. The story also owes much to the British folktale dragon legends as described by Jacqueline Simpson and Ralph Whitlock.[13] Many of these folktale dragon slayers, like Giles, are "Churls" rather than Knights, either local landowners or "Village Heroes" (Simpson, *British Dragons* 53–72). Like many of these stories, *Farmer Giles* is an example of

[12] See Christina Scull, "Dragons from Andrew Lang's retelling of Sigurd to Tolkien's Chrysophylax," 54–55; John D. Rateliff, "Earlier Versions of *Farmer Giles of Ham*," 45; and Scull and Hammond 2006, 221.

[13] See Jacqueline Simpson, "Fifty British Dragon Tales: An Analysis" and *British Dragons*, and Ralph Whitlock, *Here Be Dragons*.

a "charter myth": "Several of these tales either state or strongly imply that it was as a result of the hero's bravery in killing the dragon that his family was ennobled, or received certain specified estates […] which quite often included the right to have a dragon as crest to the family coat of arms" (61, 132). Like many of these tales (89–100), *Farmer Giles* is also a local legend used to explain the origin of certain 'real' place names, such as Tame and Worminghall (Wunnle) (76–77). Part of the claim of such local legends is that "You can see it there still" (Simpson, *British Dragons* 89). In much the same way the narrator of the First Manuscript version of *Farmer Giles* states: "The family of Giles took the name of Worming from the dragon and the village of Ham was ever afterwards called Worminghall because of them. I believe you can find it still on the map though rivers have changed since those days, and no king lives there now" (100).

Another connection with British folktale dragon legends is Farmer Giles's slightly outlandish getup. Simpson describes some of the bizarre protective coverings that the British folktale dragon-slayers wear: they have suits of armour "studded with spear-heads, razorblades, knives, spikes, or sharpened hooks" (Simpson, *British Dragons* 80); at other times the hero plasters himself in pitch or birdlime, possibly as a form of disguise. Similarly, in the Saga of Ragnar Lodbrokk ('Shaggy-Breeks'), which follows the *Völsunga Saga* in the unique surviving manuscript containing both, the hero boiled his clothes in pitch and rolled in sand before doing battle with the dragon.[14] According to Simpson, it has been suggested (I think rather fancifully) that this was an actual procedure used "by warriors who could not afford proper mailcoats" (80). When the villagers of Ham come to Farmer Giles to ask him to fight the dragon, he protests: "Me go dragon-hunting? In my old leggings and waistcoat? Dragon-fights need some kind of armour, from all I've heard tell. There isn't no armour in this house and that's a fact" (*Giles* 35). However, the village smith Sunny Sam is persuaded make a protective covering for Giles by stitching steel rings onto his old leather jerkin and breeches, together with a leather helmet. After he put these on, he placed an old felt hat over the helmet, and threw his big grey cloak over the mail coat. When asked for his reason, he replies:

> Well . . . if it is your notion to go dragon-hunting jingling and dingling like Canterbury Bells, it ain't mine. It don't seem sense to me to let a dragon know that you are coming along the road sooner than need be. And a helmet's a helmet, and a challenge to battle. Let the worm see

[14] "The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok," in *The Saga of the Volsungs, The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok, together with the Lay of Kraka* 192–95.

> only my old hat over the hedge, and maybe I'll get nearer before the trouble begins. (38)

The narrator goes on to comment: "The cloak did something to stop the noise of [the rings], but Giles cut a queer figure in his gear" (39).

There are also numerous mainly comic or ironic connections between *Farmer Giles* and medieval and renaissance literature. His dog Garm is named after the ferocious hound of Hel, the Goddess of the Norse Underworld (Sturluson, *Prose Edda* 88), but, unlike his namesake, Giles's Garm is a complete coward. Giles's sword Caudimordax, like Aragorn's and Túrin's, owes something to Sigurd's sword Gram, but perhaps more to the Norse God Frey's, "which was such a good one that it fought by itself" (62). As Rateliff suggests ("Earlier Versions" 46), Caudimordax or "Tailbiter" is an appropriate epithet for a dragon-sword, calling to mind not only both the classical Ouroboros and the Midgard serpent (Sturluson, *Prose Edda* 56), but also the Sea-serpent in Tolkien's own *Roverandom*.

Another interesting connection is with the Dragon Fight in Book I of Spenser's *Fairie Queene*. When the Dragon first attacks Redcrosse, he disables the Dragon by piercing him under the left wing with his spear which

> glauncing from his scaly necke, did glyde
> Close under his left wing, then broad displayd.
> The percing steele there wrought a wound full wyde,
> That with the uncouth smart the Monster lowdly cryde. (I.xi.20.6–9)

The Dragon then finds himself unable to fly: "The beast impatient of his smarting wound […] / Thought with his wings to stye above the ground; / But his late wounded wing unserviceable found" (I.xi.25.7–9). Similarly, Caudimordax disables Chrysophylax by "smiting the dragon on the joint of the right wing, a ringing blow that shocked him exceedingly. […] It was quite enough for Chrysophylax—he could not use his wings for days. Up he got and turned to fly, and found that he could not" (*Giles* 44). In Spenser's *Fairie Queene* later on in the second day of the dragon fight when Spenser's Dragon returns to attack Redcrosse, he succeeds in chopping the dragon's tail off:

> Inflamed with wrath, his raging blade he heft,
> And strooke so strongly, that the knotty string
> Of his huge taile he quite a sunder cleft,
> Five joynts thereof he hewd, and but the stump him left. (I.xi.39.6–9)

The motif of chopping of the dragon's tail does not commonly occur in dragon fights. In Tolkien we have the comic parallel to the idea of eating

dragon's tail (and the self-parody mock-dragon tail cake) at the Christmas feast.[15] Although in the *Völsunga Saga* Sigurd eats the heart of Fáfnir, thereby acquiring magical knowledge, only in *Farmer Giles of Ham* (22–23, 27) and *Roverandom* (33) is dragon's tail considered a delicacy. Scull and Hammond in their commentary to *Farmer Giles* also suggest a parallel with the traditional custom of bringing in the Boar's Head at Christmas feasts (*Giles* 113–14).

There are also some connections with the Legend of Saint George. The humiliating way in which Chrysophylax is chased or paraded through the streets of Ham, both first when he is wounded by Giles (44–45), and later when forced to bring his treasure back on his back to Ham (66–67), parallels the manner in which the dragon conquered by St. George in *The Golden Legend* is led tamely into the city it had been attacking by a maiden's girdle tied around its neck.[16] Also, Giles's son George has a (fragmentary) adventure of his own, though, far from fighting dragons, he has to be rescued by Chrysophylax from the dungeon of the Giant Caunus (101–103). There may be an ironic parallel here with the rescue of Redcrosse (who is later revealed to be "Saint George") from the prison of the giant Orgoglio by Prince Arthur and his squire and Una in *Fairie Queene* Book I, Canto viii, which also involves a dragon-fight between Prince Arthur and the "fruitfull-headed beast" ridden by Duessa (*FQ* I.viii.12–22, cf. I.iv.10.4-5).

Another strand that Tolkien draws on here is Arthurian tradition, though in the Foreword the narrator suggests that the story actually took place before the time of Arthur (7–8). Chrysophylax is clearly, like the White Dragon in *Roverandom*, a Welsh dragon (cf. *Letters* 130). Chrysophylax comes from the mountain-country away west and north of the clearly Oxfordshire setting of the Little Kingdom (10, 23–25). This is explicitly identified as Venedotia (North Wales) in the Envoi (78, cf.8).

There are also some interesting parallels with the *Völsunga Saga*. Chrysophylax's cave is described in terms reminiscent of Fáfnir's: "At last on the west side of the mountain they came to the mouth of the cave. It was large and black and forbidding, and its brazen gates swung on great pillars of iron. Plainly it had been a place of great strength and pride in days long forgotten […]. The doors of this deep house were set wide, and in their shadow they halted" (*Giles* 62). In the *Völsunga Saga* we are told that after Sigurd slew Fáfnir (and Regin):

[15] Another possibility (no doubt known to Tolkien) is that it may have been suggested by the fact that snake is considered a delicacy in many parts of the world.

[16] "Saint George," in *Medieval Narrative: A Book of Translations*, 415.

> He then leapt onto his horse and rode along Fafnir's trail until he came to the lair, which he found open. All the doors were made of iron, as were all their fastenings. All the posts in the house were also of iron, and they had been sunk into earth. There Sigurd found an enormous store of gold […]. He found so much gold that he expected it to be more than two or even three horses could carry. He took all the gold and put it into two large chests and then took Grani by the bridle. His horse would not budge and whipping was useless. Sigurd now discovered what the horse wanted. He leapt onto his back and put spurs to him and the horse ran as if unencumbered. (Byock trans. ch.20, p.66)

There is also an amusing contrast with the attitude of the grey mare in *Farmer Giles*. While Grani seems initially reluctant to carry the treasure, he is only waiting for Sigurd to leap on his back before he rides off with the treasure, even though it is much more than what any ordinary horse could carry. When Chrysophylax brings out the treasure from his cave, the grey mare, on the other hand, starts getting anxious: "'Who's going to carry all this stuff home, I wonder?' thought she; and she gave such a long sad look at all the bags and all the boxes that the farmer guessed her mind. 'Never you worry, lass!' said he, 'We'll make the old worm do the carting'" (*Giles* 63). In the end the dragon has to carry most of the treasure and the gray mare is given only a small load.

Farmer Giles's grey mare is a "helpful animal" who is an obvious embodiment of the instinctive wisdom of the hero, but she also very definitely has a distinctive personality of her own. Because Giles trusts her he is guided to do the right thing at certain crucial points in the narrative. She bears certain similarities to the shaggy little horse of the Irish hero Conn-eda, which guided him on his quest: "Conn-eda mounted the unimpressive steed, and let the reins fall loose on its neck so that the animal might take whatever road it chose. It was a magical horse, possessed of the gift of speech, and it carried its rider safely through a series of adventures" (Zimmer 28). Although the grey mare does not sacrifice her life to help Farmer Giles in the way Conn-eda's steed does (30–32), her instinctive prudence and wisdom saves the lives of both Farmer Giles and herself on more than one occasion.

Farmer Giles is no "hero" in the conventional sense: unlike the knights, who, according to Chrysophylax, "always kill dragons, if we don't kill them first" (60), Giles is quite willing to make a bargain with the dragon. Chrysophylax, in exchange for being allowed to keep some of his treasure, offers to help Farmer Giles: "If you will leave me what remains […] I'll be your friend for ever. And I will carry this treasure back to your honour's own house and not to the King's. And I will help you to keep it, what is more" (64). Giles agrees. The narrator praises his decision:

> A knight would have stood out for the whole hoard and got a curse laid upon it. And as likely as not, if Giles had driven the worm to despair, he would have turned and fought in the end, Tailbiter or no Tailbiter. In which case Giles, if not slain himself, would have been obliged to slaughter his transport and leave the best part of his gains in the mountains. (64)

In the *Völsunga Saga* Fáfnir's treasure already had a curse placed on it by Andvari the Dwarf, when Loki demanded Andvari's last gold ring: this curse led ultimately to Sigurd's death. Because Giles is not greedy he avoids being cursed in the first place.[17] *Farmer Giles* shows that Tolkien gave some serious thought to the improbabilities of the account of the *Völsunga Saga*: even a magical stead like Grani would have had great difficulty carrying the vast treasure of the Nibelungs away from Fáfnir's cave.

While it is certainly possible to enjoy Tolkien's children's stories on their own, a consideration of literary "sources," influences and models that Tolkien may have drawn on can enrich our appreciation of Tolkien's own artistic creativity. In particular, an examination of Tolkien's transformations of these sources helps to highlight the richness of his strongly developed sense of humor and comic sensibility, a richness that has not always been fully recognized by scholars or fans.

[17] In a similar way Bilbo is free of the "dragon sickness," the curse of Smaug's treasure in *The Hobbit*, unlike Thorin Oakenshield whose death in a sense represented the working out of the curse. In *The Hobbit* the question of "transport" also suddenly becomes an issue when Smaug asks Bilbo about how he is going to get his part of the treasure home:

> "I don't know if it has occurred to you that, even if you could steal the gold bit by bit—a matter of a hundred years or so—you could not get it very far? […] Bless me! Had you never thought of the catch? A fourteenth share, I suppose, or something like it, those were the terms, eh? But what about delivery? What about cartage? What about armed guards and tolls?"[…]
>
> You will hardly believe it, but poor Bilbo was really very taken aback. […] He had never bothered to wonder how the treasure was to be removed, certainly never how any part of it that might fall to his share was to be brought back all the way to Bag-End Under-Hill. (*Annotated Hobbit* XII.281)

Bilbo solves the problem of transport by renouncing his "fourteenth share," when he gives the Arkenstone to Bard and the Elvenking to bargain with, and in the end is content to return home with only two small chests of treasure (XVIII.351).

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About the Author

Romuald I. Lakowski is a member of the English Department at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada, where he has taught courses on Shakespeare, Medieval Drama, Early Medieval Literature, History of the English Language, and Children's Literature, as well as seminars on Thomas More, Spenser, Early Modern Utopias, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Renaissance English Poetry. He has published several articles and book chapters on Tolkien in *Mythlore*, *Mythprint*, *The Ring Goes Ever On: Proceedings of the Tolkien 2005 Conference*, *The Mirror Crack'd: Fear and Horror in J.R.R. Tolkien's Major Works*, and *Tolkien and Shakespeare: Essays on Shared Themes and Language*. His 2007 Mythlore article on "The Fall and Repentance of Galadriel" was reprinted in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

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